



Navajo, Hopi Nations Prepare For Arrival of CyberJustice

Spread out across a vast, rural expanse of 25,351 square miles in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, the people of the Navajo and Hopi Nations are isolated from most perks of modern life. Nearly half of all Navajo homes lack basic utilities such as complete plumbing, while three out of every four have no telephone. And the Internet? It seems a distant dream here in the remote, dirt-splattered landscapes of the Southwest.

While the hi-tech boom of the past decade may have provided many Americans with access to a wealth of information and services from their homes, Native Americans in these communities lack access to computers and the fruits of the World Wide Web.

But that may soon be changing.

Last year, Legal Services Corporation (LSC) took a major step in bridging the digital divide on these reservations by awarding DNA-People's Legal Services a \$246,925 grant to use technology to educate the Navajo and Hopi people of their rights under the law. In Navajo, "DNA" is an acronym translated to mean, "Attorneys who work for the economic revitalization of the people." The legal aid program based in Window Rock, Ariz., has long worked to improve the daily lives of its mostly Native American clientele. Digitizing access to justice is merely the latest incarnation.

Using federal funds, DNA installed eight satellite dishes last August at its branch offices in

Window Rock, Chinle, Keams Canyon and Tuba City, Ariz.; in Crownpoint, Shiprock and Farmington, N.M.; and in Mexican Hat, Utah. The Navajo and Hopi reservations have been wired to the Internet using high-speed satellite connections. Program leaders are now in the process of erecting computer kiosks that will enable clients to connect to a multimedia, virtual community resource center. Users will be able to access legal resources and information in English, Navajo or Hopi. The kiosks also will offer voice tutorials with easy-to-follow instructions and graphic prompts, so the system is accessible to users of every literacy level.

The new virtual resource center is intended to help Native Americans realize and protect their Constitutional and legal rights. The first of several modules now being developed focuses on consumer and tax law, instructing users how to purchase a car, avoid pawnshop scams, and where and when to attend free income-tax seminars. Additional modules, such as one focusing on domestic violence, also are under development.

"It's important that the legal rights of the Navajo and Hopi people be protected," LSC President John Erlenborn said. "If we can protect those rights and help bridge the digital divide, then we have succeeded on two fronts." ■

—Elizabeth Cushing and Sara McPherson



The Navajo Nation in Window Rock, Ariz., readies for the Internet age. Many Native American clients will be receiving their first exposure to computer technology as they learn to protect their legal rights.

